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ABSTRACT

Reading to children provokes curiosity about books and arouses the desire to learn to read quickly and well. It helps them to learn what reading is all about, it enlarges their vocabulary, and it exposes them to new and exciting experiences. Reading to children also helps them to become familiar with books, their use and their handling. In addition, children learn that books are a rich source of information, enjoyment, and challenge. Positive associations with reading are established when families read together, with a bond formed between reader and listener. Thus, reading in the home should be a daily activity and should even become a group activity. To make reading appeal to children, allow them to help select the books, and to personalize the reading, have a special place to keep each child's books. Books are gifts children never outgrow. Parents can serve as models for children because when they see their parents or other adults reading, children realize that reading must be something special. What one does about reading says a lot more to children than what one says about reading. Take the time to read with your children. Take them to the library to shop for books. And make your home a place where reading is a natural, useful, and enjoyable activity. (SW)

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Why read aloud to children?

"Daddy, please read a story to me," pleads five-year-old Lisa. Then she hands her father *The Five Hundred Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins* from her collection of Dr. Seuss books. After he finishes the tale of the boy who couldn't take off a hat without another appearing on his head, Lisa begs, "Oh, please read it again!"

Even though the story may have been heard a hundred and one times, there is a certain magical quality about being read to that makes children ask for "More!"

Many parents read to their children almost every day – at bedtime, during quiet time, or while waiting in the car for Dad to come home on the commuter train. Anytime is a good time for a story.

Yet, how often do parents think about the many benefits that result when they read to their children? Seeing the delight in a child's face as he is read to is reward enough to most parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, babysitters, and even older brothers and sisters. Does the child gain anything, however, beyond the entertainment value of whatever he hears?

An IRA Micromonograph
by Julie M.T. Chan

Reading as a family activity

Reading to children provokes curiosity about books and arouses the desire to learn to read quickly and well. Reading to children helps them learn what reading is all about. It enlarges their vocabulary and exposes them to new and exciting experiences. Reading to children helps them become familiar with books and their use and their handling. When children are read to, they learn that books are a rich source of information, enjoyment, and challenge. Hopefully, a taste for good books is acquired. But best of all, reading to children gives them an opportunity to enjoy an experience with someone else, either on a one-to-one basis or as part of a group activity.

People who have a genuine love for reading often come from homes in which reading was a family activity shared by all, just as camping or hiking are shared in today's contemporary families. They often remember how much they enjoyed reading together as a family. They often recall the warmth and glow of the family circle. Such experiences encourage a reader to continue reading throughout his life and to want to read to his children when he has a family of his own.

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Good feelings about reading

Positive associations with reading are formed when families read together because of the bond formed between reader and listener. There is a feeling of closeness as you sit together, sharing something enjoyable. A feeling of security emerges in the child as he hears tones of love in the voices of those who are reading. Children regard reading as a special kind of sharing because they have the personal attention of their parents in a world of fantasy or realism, depending on the story being told.

A way of sharing

Reading in the home should be a daily activity. In addition to personal reading by individual members, reading should also be a group activity. Reading together as a family can be a tradition which each member – from the youngest to the oldest – looks forward to each day.

The time set aside for reading together as a family need not be limited to reading from a book. Story telling and other reading-related activities are also appropriate. The key to this special time set aside for reading is that of *sharing*. Reading is always more fun when it is shared.

What are some ways to share reading? Each reader can take turns reading from a book, telling a story, or relating an experience that happened during the day. New aspects of reading can be introduced into the family circle. For example, Dad might tell about some unusual signs or billboards he noticed while driving home from work. Mother might mention that she is preparing a new recipe for dinner tonight, a recipe that she read about in the morning newspaper. School age children could recount what was read in class, dramatizing or explaining various topics in history, science, or even mathematics.

When the younger members of the family read aloud from a favorite book, the effort should be appreciated for its content rather than performance. Each person should be made to feel that his particular contribution is worthwhile, whether it be narration, oral interpretation, dramatization, report, or illustration.

Make reading personal

Reading should be a meaningful activity for each participant. To make reading appeal to your children, allow them to help select the books that are to be read. On the days you go grocery shopping, why not include a stop at the local library to "shop" for books to take home to read?

Reading can be personalized for each child when he has a special place to keep his books. Pride in having books – whether borrowed or received – is enhanced when a child is

given a bookcase of his own and the responsibility of caring for his books. Your children can help build a small bookcase and help decide where it is to be placed in the room.

Reading is further personalized for a child when he has books of his own. Books make nice gifts for special days like birthdays and Christmas. Enrolling a child in a monthly book club gives him something he can look forward to and encourages selection skills. Children often enjoy collecting the works of various authors in chronological order. The prairie stories of Laura Ingalls Wilder, the Dr. Doolittle books by Hugh Lofting, and the Moffat books by Eleanor Estes all make good choices.

Books are gifts children never outgrow. Rather, books become better as the years go by because memories of an earlier time are brought back for a few moments when a favorite book is reread once more. It is always fun to go back and read an "easy" book – long after passing that age, grade, and stage.

Parents as models in reading

When children see reading as a major activity in the lives of adults – mother, father, grandparents, or teacher – they soon realize that reading must be something important.

Consequently, reading to children should not stop when your children begin to read for themselves. When adults continue to read to children who have already learned to read, they are setting a model for children to follow. Reading aloud makes the younger members of the family eager to learn to read and it makes the older children want to perfect their skills in reading.

When you take the time each day to read together as a family, you are not only providing much-needed time in which to practice reading, but you are also showing your children that you consider reading important enough to take the time to do it. What you *do* about reading says a lot more to your children than what you *say* about reading. **Do** take the time to read with your children. **Do** take them to the library to shop for books. **Do** help them select books at the bookstore, and encourage them to share book experiences with you. **Do** take time to read yourself. And **do** make your home a place where reading is a natural, useful, and enjoyable activity.

Fathers are especially encouraged to share in the responsibility of reading to their children. Fathers are important models in reading, especially to their sons. All too often, fathers are not seen reading in the home. For example, Mark's father reads the evening newspaper on the train before he gets home. The first thing he does after dinner is turn on the television set. Is it any wonder that Mark spends hours in front of the TV, scorning books as "sissy" because "Daddy doesn't read books"? When children see their father reading, they learn that it is natural for men to read, too. Furthermore, when adults read, care should be made to include books and other hardbound materials in addition to the daily newspaper and weekly or monthly magazines.

Reading provides new experiences

Books often provide new experiences for children — experiences which they may not always have the chance to share firsthand. Not all of us can travel to foreign lands or live in different cultures.

When firsthand experiences are not possible, vicarious experiences are good substitutes. Homes around the world are the same everywhere because families live in them. But homes are different, too, since they must be built to suit existing climates and make use of available materials. *Come Over To My House* (1966) by Theodore LeSieg pictorially illustrates this concept. The traditions of another culture and its holidays are explained as part of the story in *Mei Li* (1938) by Thomas Handforth, *Little Pear* (1954) by Eleanor F. Lattimore, and *Moy Moy* (1960) by Leo Politi. In these three books, children learn that the Chinese culture has special holidays of its own.

Preparation for new events

Books are also a good way to prepare children for new events. For example, a child who is scheduled to go to the hospital for a tonsillectomy may be prepared through books for what could be a fearful experience. Arthur Shay's *When You Go To the Hospital* (1969) can ease a child's apprehensions because this booklet tells the child what to expect when he enters the hospital. In lifelike photographs, the story takes the reader through a hospital stay, from admission to discharge — as well as the return home.

Children entering nursery school will have a better idea of what happens at school and what they will do there when parents read Edith Hurd's *Come With Me to Nursery School* (1970) prior to beginning school.

Parents planning family trips might consult Miroslav Sasek's books, an excellent means for preparing children for travel. Children become familiar with landmarks, customs, and habits of different areas through books such as *This Is London* (1959), *This Is New York* (1960), and *This Is Greece* (1966). Parents can also reinforce children's experiences on a trip by reading an appropriate book to them when they return home. If children do not accompany their parents on a trip, books can be used to acquaint children with the location and sights of the region visited. Books written at a child's level of understanding are sometimes better than a slide show.

Values developed

Through books, children can develop a sense of social and moral values and attitudes, as well as a philosophy for living. You can help your child understand himself and his world by providing books with stories and characters about things important to him. Children learn to endure the pains of growing up when they have books to help them cope with their personal problems. *Crow Boy* (1955) by Taro Yashima helps children learn that every person has something he can do well, while *The Smallest Boy in the Class* (1949) by Jerrold Beim helps a child learn that physical size may not be the most important attribute in a person. Marguerite DeAngeli's *The Door in the Wall* (1950) shows how one child was able to cope with his physical handicap, while *The Hundred Dresses* (1945) by Eleanor Estes shows how another child was able to overcome a social handicap. In these stories, superficial handicaps were less important than human dignity.

Useful information

Children learn many new ideas and concepts from books, as well as specialized vocabulary used in individual stories. Children often play make-believe, taking on the roles of individuals they would like to become when they grow up. Carla Greene's *Doctors and Nurses: What Do They Do?* (1963) helps a child become familiar with the work of those involved in health care, and the *Come to Work With Us* books by Jean and Ned Wilkinson take the reader into the workaday world of persons who work with the aerospace industry, house construction business, or the telephone company. In addition, such books help children gain a better understanding of what their mothers or fathers do at work.

The child with a hobby or a special interest can learn more about it through reading. For example, a child with a new puppy can learn how to care for his pet by reading Millicent E. Selsam's *How Puppies Grow* (1972) which explains the care, feeding, and growth of a puppy. The child who wants to join a little league team can become acquainted with baseball jargon by reading Leonard Kessler's *Here Comes the Strikeout* (1965). *Kick, Pass, and Run* by Leonard Kessler and *Kick-off* (1960) by Phyllis Fenner familiarize the young football fan with the terminology and rules of the game.

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Entertainment

The most obvious benefit of reading to children is that of entertainment. Pleasure, enjoyment, and fun in reading are paramount. To delight in a book for its own sake and to be able to laugh at and with the characters are experiences that no child should be denied. For example, children not only identify with Charlie as he takes the prize tour through a chocolate factory in Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), but they also enjoy with him the pleasures and surprises that he finds there. Children particularly relish stories which contain gross exaggerations or fantastic situations. The experiences of Dr. Seuss' characters in *And to Think I Saw It On Mulberry Street* (1937) are a sheer delight in make-believe.

Learning what reading is all about

By hearing stories, children learn what reading is all about. By being read to children learn that reading time is a period to sit still and to listen quietly. They begin to think about, to question, and to interpret the ideas they have heard. They discover that reading is ideas written down. Thus, when reading instruction is begun in school, many of the mechanics of reading will already be familiar.

Becoming familiar with books

By being read to, children develop a curiosity about books and a desire to learn to read. They also learn that books are a source of useful information and enjoyment. In using books, children learn how to handle them and to respect them as friends. Familiarity with books is important because some children enter school never having seen or touched a book. Such children do not know how to hold books, nor do they know what to do with one when it is first handed to them. Fortunate are those children who are read to from earliest childhood and who have books in the home. They have a head start because they know all the good things that books can bring.

Thinking, questioning, and interpreting

Children listen with intense concentration when they hear a story. They must think in order to follow the sequence of events, remember details, and understand the story. Children also ask questions about things they don't understand – about what will happen, why it happened, and the relationship of events and characters. In this manner, children are reading the lines, reading between the lines, and reading beyond the lines.

By thinking and questioning, children are learning to comprehend. Comprehension involves listening to ideas, absorbing the ideas, thinking about them, and then interpreting or using the

ideas in terms of and in accordance with one's own experiences with life.

Children can interpret stories by drawing a picture of their favorite part of the story, or retelling that favorite part with their own version of how it should be expressed. They learn that each listener can have a different favorite part, a different interpretation, or a different impression from the same story.

Mechanics of reading

Children learn some of the mechanics of reading by having stories read to them. They notice that a book has a beginning, middle, and end and that it should be held so the lines of print and the pictures can be seen. They notice that the reader's eyes move back and forth, from one side of the printed page to the other. By observing the reader casually gliding his hand along the lines of print, children learn that reading is an activity done from left to right, from one line to the next, and from page to page until the story ends.

Children recognize, too, that the reader's voice starts, sometimes pauses, and then stops, only to start up again. They learn there are "signals" on the printed page, such as capital letters, commas, colons, semicolons, exclamation marks, question marks, and periods – all telling the reader when to start, when to pause, and when to stop.

Speech to print

By being read to, children learn to associate what they hear with what they see. The symbols on the printed page represent those words which the reader is saying aloud. And the listener is hearing the ideas of someone who took the time to write out his thoughts so that someone else could share them through reading. When children are read aloud to they soon recognize words they hear and see repeatedly. They discover patterns in words and sounds and then begin to associate these with the corresponding symbols in print. Thus, children often "read" long before they begin school by memorizing stories which have been read to them many times.

Acquiring a taste for good books

When children are read to, they develop a sense of literary and artistic appreciation. Parents can play an important role in guiding a child's reading habits. And a parent's influence can be a long-lasting one. Young children who have had pleasurable experiences looking at their own books, listening to stories while being read to, and sharing ideas about books with their parents will likely develop a love for books and an appreciation of good literature. Good books enchant children and adults as well.

Which books?

There are hundreds of books for children. How can you find the best for your child? You may try consulting a children's librarian, browsing through a book yourself to check whether it is suitable for your child's maturity and interest, seeking a book by an author whose books you have enjoyed in the past, or looking for a book about a particular subject or interest.

Annually, the Children's Book Council publishes *Aids For Choosing Books.* It is an up-to-date review of all available reading lists dealing with recommended books for children. Reading lists, librarians, and teachers, however, cannot predict what will be best for your child's interests. As the person who knows your child best, you are in the position to make the final choice in selecting books suitable for your child.

Another micromonograph in this series, "What Books and Records Should I Get For My Preschooler?" by Norma Rogers, lists a set of criteria by which books may be selected.

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Aids For Choosing Books. Children's Book Council, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10010. Send 35¢ and a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

Anytime is a good time for a story. When are some of these times during the day?

What you do about reading is more important than what you say about reading. What can parents do about reading?

What do children gain from being read to?

What reading-related activities may be used during story time?

How can your home environment be conducive to reading?

How can parents set a good example in reading?

The International Reading Association attempts, through its publications, to provide a forum for a wide spectrum of opinion on reading. This policy permits divergent viewpoints without assuming the endorsement of the Association. *Why read aloud to children?* was prepared for the International Reading Association as a continuation of the micromonograph series which was originated by the Clearinghouse on Reading (Eric/Crier) at Indiana University under the direction of James L. Laffey, Bruce J. Tone, and Billie Strunk. Eight titles in this series are now available from IRA:

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